

Condom Distribution—Who is Benefiting?

by Shannon Kelley

The topic of condom distribution in public schools has caused many heated debates throughout our country in the last decade. Proponents of distribution state that free condom distribution will ensure that teenagers will practice safe sex and that the rate of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy will decline. Opponents of distribution state that free condom distribution will encourage sexual activity and foster the idea that premarital sex is acceptable. Judges in federal court have even considered whether or not condom distribution and sex education without prior parental notification violates parents' First and Fourteenth Amendment rights. The only viewpoint absent in a discussion of this very controversial topic is the one that holds the most value: the viewpoint of America's teenagers. Teenagers are the only ones who can fully explain why condom distribution fails to respond to the needs that foster sexual activity among young people.

Though I am not a sexually active teenager, refraining from sexual involvement has been difficult. I have been in serious relationships where the desire to have sex has been complicated by emotional expectations. Abstinence is especially hard in a society that seems to promote sex, as long as it is "safe" sex. I feel that the support, which used to come from authority figures such as parents and educators, is crumbling because of the initiation of programs such as condom distribution. It is as though parents and schools have forgotten that some teenagers, for whatever personal reasons, do not desire to be sexually active. I do not minimize the need to educate teenagers about safe sex and the risks of sexually transmitted diseases, for I am fully aware of how sexually active American teenagers are today. The latest statistic I read on this subject claims that "Most teenagers (75% to 86%) have their first sexual intercourse between the ages of 15-20" (Fanburg). No doubt a large majority of American teenagers are sexually active, but I believe the assumption that all teenagers are, or desire to be, sexually active is fallacious. I think that in making this assumption, we have oversimplified the solution to the problem. I am confident that if we took the time to ask why so many teenagers are sexually active today, we would discover the solution is not a simple one. Maybe we have not asked in fear of discovering that a satisfactory solution requires more thought and energy than deciding whether or not to keep a basket of condoms in the nurse's room.

John Leo, a columnist for *U.S. News and World Report*, reveals hidden solutions to preventing the problems caused by teenage sex. These solutions have remained hidden because they involve directly communicating with American teenagers. Leo's article specifically discusses the opinions of young women about sexual intercourse, motherhood, and self-esteem issues. The title of Leo's article, "Learning to Say No," immediately informs the reader that contrary to most of society's beliefs, teenagers often struggle with their decision to have sexual intercourse. The title implies that "saying no" to sexual intercourse is not as simple as some depict it to be; rather, the ability to refuse needs to be taught as an important component of any sexual education program. Leo explicitly states that the most effective method of preventing teen pregnancies is not distributing condoms, but teaching teenage girls how to refuse sex. The purpose of Leo's argument is to reveal that their partners often pressure young teenage girls into sex. Leo effectively explains the reasons behind this pressure when he says: "Many girls don't want to drift into early sex and early motherhood, but they do. Their problem isn't a shortage of latex products but a lack of sense of self and a lack of social support for abstinence among friends and parents and in our anything-goes sexual culture." Leo's main method of support for his argument is the presentation of statistical information and the citation of credible authorities. For instance, Leo refers to the research of a respected authority by stating, "When Marion Howard, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Emory University, asked more than 1,000 teenage girls in Atlanta what they wanted to learn in sex education, 84 percent of the girls answered 'How to say no

without hurting the other person's feelings.' " Just think about the significance of that statistic. It implies that over 80% of teenage girls do not want to have sexual intercourse with their partners. Parents, judges, and school teachers may be correct in assuming that many teenagers today are sexually active, but assuming that all teenagers desire to be sexually active is a whole different story--a story which we do not want to consider, a story that we pretend does not exist.

While Leo's opinion may initially seem drastic to the reader, his reliance upon extensive statistics and examples of successful programs convinces the reader at least to consider the validity of his argument. One way Leo communicates his persona in the article occurs in his depiction of society's support for condom distribution. For example, Leo writes, "The word 'abstinence,' of course, is a Pavlovian signal for group snickering in Medialand, where everyone knows for sure that from age 11 or so, American children copulate much of the time no matter what society thinks or does. All we can do is shrug, swath everybody in latex and get out the way of the hormonal rush." In this statement Leo assumes the persona of a cynical member of the media, allowing the reader to share and understand his sarcastic viewpoint. Not only his mask, but also his language, fully reveal his persona. The way he addresses society's view on abstinence as being "A Pavlovian signal for group snickering in Medialand" clearly and wittily expresses his negative feelings towards our sex-driven media and the way which they disregard the value and plausibility of abstinence. Although Leo risks committing the fallacy of false dichotomy, he effectively satirizes society's belief that the only way to solve the problem is to distribute condoms.

Leo is correct when he states that girls are struggling to "say no" in today's society. I believe the reason I was able to "say no" was due to the strong support of my family and friends. If they lack that support and source of love, many girls may agree to have sexual intercourse with their partners. The reason is not their "raging hormones," but their desire to hold onto what they see as the one source of love in their lives. For this reason, I understand why programs that promote the teaching of concepts like self-esteem, self-assertiveness, and the need to protect girls from boys are more effective than condom distribution. Rush Limbaugh's article, "Condoms: The New Diploma," likewise describes the need to protect girls from sexual pressure. Limbaugh nostalgically remembers that "Not so long ago, school policy, including that on many college campuses, was designed to protect the girls from the natural and instinctive aggressive pursuit of young men" (427).

Even though most schools do not distribute condoms, the fact that some do illustrates the changing attitude of schools towards teenage sex. Schools are no longer places that encourage and support girls in their decision to stay abstinent; rather, they have become an environment that promotes the message, "It's okay. We know you are going to have sex. Here is a condom; we just want you to be safe." Even when schools' sex education programs promote abstinence, the provision of condoms defeats the entire message. Limbaugh's essay includes a quotation from Nancy Corwin, a member of the Jacksonville, Florida, school board, who believes that "Schools send a nonsensical message when they teach kids not to have sex but then give them condoms" (428). Not only is condom distribution sending a mixed message to teenage Americans, but also it avoids the true problem. Haven Bradford Gow, in his article "Condom Distribution in High School" argues, "When schools supply children with contraceptives, they simply address the symptoms, rather than the root causes of the problem, which are our popular sexual attitudes and practices" (183).

We are a society that addresses symptoms and not causes. For instance, instead of eating properly and exercising to lose weight, we would rather purchase "fat-trapper pills" and invest in millions of other diet gimmicks. Our search for the easy solution to teenage promiscuity is no different. It is so much less time-consuming, and less embarrassing to advocate "safe" sex through condom distribution than to step back and really examine why teenagers are having sex so early.

I think deep down many know that the reasons go far beyond just hormones, but admitting the true causes requires one to take responsibility for a complicated solution, a solution that involves action, not only by teenagers, but also by parents and teachers. Even Anna Quindlen, a proponent of condom distribution, acknowledges another, deeper issue that lies beneath the condom distribution debate. In her essay entitled "A Pyrrhic Victory," Quindlen emphasizes, "This isn't really about condoms, of course, but about control and the shock of adolescent sexuality and the difficulty parents have communicating with their kids..." (432). Lack of open communication and understanding existing between the majority of teenagers and their parents, Quindlen says, is the true culprit in the search for reasons behind the increase in teenage sexual intercourse today.

Lack of communication does not pertain just to issues of sexual intercourse but to all issues. I believe that when teenagers do not receive a clear message concerning the love and support of their parents, often, as I have said, they seek that love and support in a romantic relationship. When the threat of losing that one source of love arises, teenage girls will do almost anything, even giving up their virginity, to preserve the relationship. For similar reasons, Leo also mentions the need to target boys through sex education courses. In his closing paragraph, Leo quotes Edwin Delattre, the dean of the Boston University School of Education, who asserts his opinion that sex-education programs need to teach a "a variation of the golden rule." Specifically, they must teach that "it's wrong to manipulate and exploit a partner for sexual gratification, and it's wrong to launch a pregnancy and not take responsibility for it." The final sentence of Leo's article is a rhetorical question: "Isn't that [responsible sexual discipline] a teachable moral premise that commands broad assent?"

To that question, I answer, "yes." I believe the true, effective way of preventing, or at least decreasing, teenage promiscuity is once again to teach morals and to create an environment that applauds and supports people who choose abstinence as method of safe sex. We also need to teach males not to pressure their girlfriends for sex. I am not claiming that no teenage female wants to have sex, for some of my close girlfriends do desire a sexual relationship, but sex ed programs need to demonstrate that using sex as a substitute for intimacy and love in many teenage relationships is inexcusably wrong. Additionally, parents and teenagers need to open up mutual lines of communication. Teenagers must know that whether they decide to be sexually active or abstinent, their parents will still love and support them. I believe if this love, support, and respect from romantic partners, parents, and friends is established, we will see far more beneficial outcomes than those which any condom can deliver.

Works Cited

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